UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/1995/NGO/18
2 February 1995

ORIGINAL : ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-first session
Item 20 of the provisional agenda

RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO NATIONAL OR ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by Baha'I International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[1 February 1995]

95-1054

1. The painful events which are taking place in many parts of the world can be best understood as a clear signal to the international community that the question of minorities must now be addressed with great urgency. The Bahá'í International Community would like to commend the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities for having included in its agenda an item concerning a comprehensive examination of the thematic issues relating to racism, xenophobia, minorities and migrant workers.

2. Mr. Asbjorn Eide's Working Paper to the 46th session of the Sub-Commission (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/36) provides a valuable starting point for this examination. He draws attention to the emergence of "two related phenomena," xenophobia and ethno-nationalism which he aptly describes as an "explosive mix."

3. Mr. Eide remarks that "There are dangers in many places of a violent disintegration of society, a situation comparable to that experienced in many parts of Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries as wars of everybody against everybody else, prior to the emergence of the organized State system and the introduction of human rights" (ibid. para. 14). The comparison can be taken a step further. The Bahá'í International Community believes that an integration process - comparable to the one that led to the organized state system - is now also taking place at the global level. This will, in turn, lead to the unification of the world.

4. The Bahá'í Teachings emphasize that the existing foundations of society need to be broadened in a way which does not conflict with any legitimate allegiances or undermine essential loyalties. The purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided. Diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world are not to be ignored or suppressed, but a wider loyalty, a larger aspiration is called upon. The Bahá'í Writings call for the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world, but they also repudiate excessive centralization and disclaim all attempts at uniformity. They answer the question of minorities with a call to "unity in diversity", in Mr. Eide's words "pluralism in togetherness" (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/34, chap. II.B). To preserve and honor diversity without making differences a cause for conflict requires a new way of thinking, based on respect for the rights of every individual. This new way of thinking, characterized some years ago as a "culture of human rights", must be developed and supported by human rights education.

5. In his Working Paper, Mr. Eide emphasizes that within human rights' education an "appropriate balance ... must be maintained between the knowledge of one's own rights and respect and protection of the rights of others, including members of different religious and ethnic groups" (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/36, para. 36). A sense of responsibility for ensuring respect for the rights of all citizens must be cultivated in both individuals and governments. When all members of a community are valued, respected, and encouraged to contribute, the entire community benefits. Every organized local or national Bahá'í community understands that its first and inescapable obligation is to nurture, encourage and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class or nation within it. And this for no other reason than to stimulate and encourage minorities, and afford them an opportunity to further the interests of the community. As the Bahá'í Writings indicate, "when divers shades of thought, temperament and character are brought together... the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest."

6. Xenophobia, ethno-nationalism, and a myriad of other divisive evils will not disappear without conscious effort to shift our shared social beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. Laws must be supported by a global culture of human rights. If violation of the rights of any person or group became socially unacceptable, this would strongly undermine the effects of manoeuvres of "cynical but skilful political entrepreneurs wanting to make use of ... irrational sentiments for purposes of political gain" (ibid., para. 13).

7. Heartfelt commitment to upholding the rights of everyone is unlikely if the goal of human rights education stops at mere tolerance. Not until we truly value the divers groups that constitute the human family and learn attitudes and skills necessary for full cooperation, will a peaceful yet pluralistic society be possible.

8. Given the monumental and critical challenges ahead, the Bahá'í International Community wholeheartedly supports the proposal put forth by the Sub-Commission on Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to establish an inter-sessional working group to examine peaceful and constructive solutions to situations involving minorities (Resolution 1994/4). The three-fold mandate of the working group, and especially the stipulation in sub-paragraph 6(c) - to "Promote dialogue between minority groups in society and between these groups and Governments" - will certainly make this working group an effective means for the promotion of cooperation and understanding. We sincerely hope that the working group will offer a platform for minorities not merely to raise grievances, but more importantly to initiate frank and constructive consultation amongst them and between them and Governments. The Bahá'í International Community stands ready to offer any assistance the Commission on Human Rights or the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities would find valuable in this most important process.